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### Hiding in the popcorn

*How Romantic nationalism survived into the 21st century*

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Mevrouw de Decaan, Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the past twenty years, I have collected a large corpus of data, cultural and historical, from different countries. My aim was to chart how the modern nation-state was created in the nineteenth century, the century of Romanticism.

Nineteenth-century nation-building started with cultural consciousness-raising in a process I have called “Romantic Nationalism”. The leading figures were intellectuals, artists and writers. They exchanged their ideas in a transnational network.

Romantic Nationalism asserts that nations as cultural communities are held together from one generation to the next by language and by an inherited culture; that these nations are the proper body politic of the state; and that as such they deserve political empowerment.

Romantic Nationalism took shape in the Europe-wide resistance against Napoleon. A century later, around the end of the First World War, it bore fruit.

From 1918 on, the “Peoples’ right to self-determination” has become a widely accepted principle. The idea of the nation-state has become the universal default. Most people agree that *states* are defined by their nations, and that *nations* are defined by their inherent and inherited cultural identity. The cultural run-up process to the paradigm of the nation-state – the development of Romantic Nationalism out of a “cultivation of culture” – has been mapped in the *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism of Europe*, online at <http://ernie.uva.nl> ..

Today I want to explore a little bit what happened to Romantic Nationalism after 1918, in the century following the First World War.

I want to begin with a look at an important twentieth-century cultural genre: film.

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The first talking movie in Dutch cinema history premiered in Amsterdam in early 1934. Ironically for something that was a talking movie, it was about a man known universally as Willam The Silent.

This biopic of the William of Orange, leader of the Dutch revolt against Spain, was announced as the country's "National film" (*Neerlands nationale film*). The publicity poster emphasized that point through a multitude of visual signals, such as the colour scheme.

In the opening intertitles, the hero is presented in terms of his Dutch-Protestant moral values, for instance his sense of justice (*rechtvaardigheidsgevoel*) and love of liberty. Not just liberty in general, but specifically for the people of the Netherlands (*de vrijheid van het Nederlandsche volk*).

Prins Willem van Oranje (1934)



ALS KNAAP BEGIFTIGD MET HET PRINSDOM „ORANJE”, OPGEVOED AAN HET HOF VAN KEIZER KAREL V, ALS DIENS VERTROUWELING GEVIERT, RIJK EN MACHTIG, WAS HET ZIJN RECHTVAARDIGHEIDSGEVOEL, DAT IN OPSTAND KWAM TEGEN EEN TYRANNIEK BEWIND, MET OPOFFERING VAN ALLES, HAVE, GOED EN LEVEN BLEEF HIJ TROUW AAN ZIJN IDEEAAL: DE VRIJHEID VAN HET NEDERLANDSCHE VOLK.

DEZE FILM WERD IN 1933 BIJ DE HERDENKING VAN DEN 400sten GEBORTE DAG EN AAN DEN VOORAVOND VAN DEN 350sten STERFDAG VAN DEN „VADER DES VADERLANDS” ALS NATIONAAL HISTORISCH DOCUMENT VOOR HET NEDERLANDSCHE VOLK VERVAARDIGD EN WERD TOT STAND GEBRACHT DOOR DEN STEUN VAN EENIGE BELANGSTELLE NDE NEDERLANDERS, OP INITIATIEF EN IN OPDRACHT VAN JHR. JAN FEITH, JAN WILS EN JAN C. W. POLAK.

That same *Nederlandsche volk* is also name-checked as the film's audience. The film is offered as a nationally-historical document (*nationaal-historisch document*) to "the people of the Netherlands". The Netherlandic people provide both the historical context of the film *and* its present-day audience. As such, it unites the past and the present. The invocation also serves to justify a modern form of commercial mass entertainment by presenting it as a commemorative, pedagogical platform for civic values.

Activating long-dead historical figures from the past for modern audiences is of course nothing unusual. This is part and parcel of belonging to a "canon". Canonicity is just that: the power to remain topical, even as times change and new media and new technologies emerge. The canonicity of William the Silent is a good example.



In the seventeenth and eighteenth century he was already celebrated in print, with engraved portraits and ambitious, now-forgotten verse epics. In the nineteenth century he received no less than two statues in The Hague, one of which shows him as “Father of the Fatherland” and obviously modelled after the portrait that also inspired the movie poster of 1934.

But by 1934 the media landscape was changing. While verse epics were becoming a thing of the past, many new suburbs were being built; and many of those were given streetnames that evoked the great national past. They could be named after painters or admirals, such as the Ferdinand Bolstraat and the Admiraal De Ruyterkade in Amsterdam. In these newly created public spaces, William the Silent had no less than 120 streets and places named after him.



These named spaces identify the country in terms of its canonical history, and demarcate its territory as nationally distinct. On the map of Europe, the Netherlands is identified by a rash of Willem-dots;

when we zoom in, it becomes apparent that there is a marked concentration of them in the Dutch heartland.

Other new mass media were also making their appearance. The state could affirm its identity by putting national icons on its banknotes and postage stamps. In addition, there was the new pursuit of cultural tourism. There was in particular that obligatory form of educational tourism that is the school outing, *het schoolreisje*. The place where Willem was shot, in Delft, became a destination for such educational pilgrimages. So was was the Rijksmuseum – a Hall of Fame for the nation's canonical heroes. On public television, Willems life was made the topic of a drama series (1984) and his celebrity was re-canonized when he was elected the “Greatest Netherlander of all Time” (2004). These processes of canonization, self-historicization and the recycling of narratives has been studied by my colleagues Lotte Jensen, Marita Mathijssen and Toos Streng.

But the process is still ongoing. The burgeoning genre of the musical – that bombastic celebration of the utterly familiar – is also going to market Willem. After *Soldaat van Oranje we get Oranje, de Soldaat*, or rather: *Willem van Oranje, de Musical Des Vaderlands*. It brings to mind the man's own dying words: *My God, my God, have mercy on me and on my poor people*.

All this belongs to the *afterlife* of a famous historical character in cultural memory. Documenting an afterlife is not an easy task for the historian. Sifting through the cultural memories and spotting the traces of a canonical icon is always a bit of a “Where's Wally?” exercise. We have to search through masses of pop culture to spot, in unexpected corners, the familiar figure.

The new media that recycle canonicity in the twentieth century are characterized by their mass outreach. This was theorized already by **Walter Benjamin** in his classic essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

Benjamin already saw that artworks were becoming commodities. That insight has more recently been elaborated by **Pierre Bourdieu**: he distinguishes between “Restricted” and “Unrestricted” cultural production. “Restricted” is a statue, or an expensive eighteenth-century book; there aren't many of them, and they are costly. “Unrestricted” is something on television or a postage stamp; it is easily affordable to huge masses of people, almost like a day at the beach. As Bourdieu sees it, Restricted forms of cultural production are more prestigious, while mass-produced, “Unrestricted” forms are cheap and down-market.

The presence of William the Silent in the twentieth century is largely to be found in “unrestricted” mass-produced pop culture. Each instance is forgettable. There is always a sense of “oh yeah, right, I'd forgotten that” when we recall that TV costume drama or even that programme on the Greatest Netherlander of All Time. We are in the realm of what is often called trivial, or at best “middlebrow” culture. That may sound snobbish, but snobbery is how the cultural marketplace works: the symbolic value of cultural products, their prestige, is a question of supply and demand; and as Bourdieu has shown, exclusivity raises symbolic value while mass supply brings the value down.

On the whole, we can see that national icons, in the century of mass entertainment, gravitate downward in their cultural prestige. As they become more popular, they become trivial.

This presents an interesting parallel with Michael Billig's famous notion of “**Banal Nationalism**”. Billig has famously pointed out that after a “hot” period, when nationalism was a mobilizing political force, it cooled down and became “banal”, something taken for granted. The true power of nationalism in the contemporary world often lies in its unobtrusive presence: as the “background noise” of the public sphere, the recycling of national symbols on everyday objects like coins or



number plates. We have stopped noticing this presence of national brands, the way we stop noticing lampposts and traffic signs. That indeed is what renders the nation something habitual, the default plain-vanilla flavour of the public sphere. By the way: don't let words like "banal" or "trivial" fool you. The power and covert agency of trivial culture and banal nationalism should not be underestimated.

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When cultural historians look at the culture of twentieth-century modernity, we think of it as by definition "modernistic". Film history is a good example of this:

Cinema as a medium uses a modern technology and it is well suited to a modern style and content. The visual quality is dynamic, expressionistic or avant-garde. Cinematic modernism would seem the very opposite of nineteenth-century romanticism. It avoids lyricism and the idyllic countryside. It celebrates the rapidly moving, mechanical aspects of life in the modern world.

So it would seem. However, that is not the whole story. In fact, the talking movie on William the Silent is part of a very important strand in cinema history, which involves recognized masters of the genre. Sergei Eisenstein made, not just *Battleship Potemkin*, but also the national epic *Alexander Nevski*. Fritz Lang made, not only the avant-garde dystopic *Metropolis* but also the *Nibelungen* the epic's most important adaptation after Wagner.

Of course, Eisenstein's celebration of the national hero Alexander Nevski was made as a piece of propaganda on the orders of Stalin, but even so there are a lot of similarities with the liberal-entrepreneurial movie about William the Silent. Eisenstein also drew on a canonicity that had been established well before Stalin, in the Romantic 19<sup>th</sup> century.

|   |                  |      |
|---|------------------|------|
| Aleksandr Nevskij Chapel [Peterhof (RU) – 18...   | Peterhof (RU)    | 1834 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Paris (FR) – 1861]   | Paris (FR)       | 1861 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Tbilisi (GE) – 18... | Tbilisi (GE)     | 1871 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Belgrade (RS) – ...  | Belgrade (RS)    | 1877 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Łódź (PL) – 1884]    | Łódź (PL)        | 1884 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Baku (AZ) – 1888]    | Baku (AZ)        | 1888 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Warsaw (PL) – 1...   | Warsaw (PL)      | 1894 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Novosibirsk (RU) ... | Novosibirsk (RU) | 1896 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Tallinn (EE) – 1...  | Tallinn (EE)     | 1900 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Yalta (UA) – 1902]   | Yalta (UA)       | 1902 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Moscow (RU) – 1...   | Moscow (RU)      | 1911 |
| Aleksandr Nevskij Cathedral [Sofia (BG) – 1912]   | Sofia (BG)       | 1912 |

29 Aleksandr Nevskij churches (14 pre-1914, 15 post-1992)

Eisenstein 1938      1991 remake      2008 remake

In this country, there are the streetnames dedicated to Wiliam the Silent; in Russia, there were the Russian-Orthodox Cathedrals dedicated to Alexander Nevski. 14 of these had been built since in the nationalistic 19<sup>th</sup> century. And while the William the Silent streets were named in the new suburbs on the outskirts of the old cities, the Alexander Nevski churches were built on the edges of the Empire, marking its sphere of influence. We encounter them as cultural outposts in Poland, in the

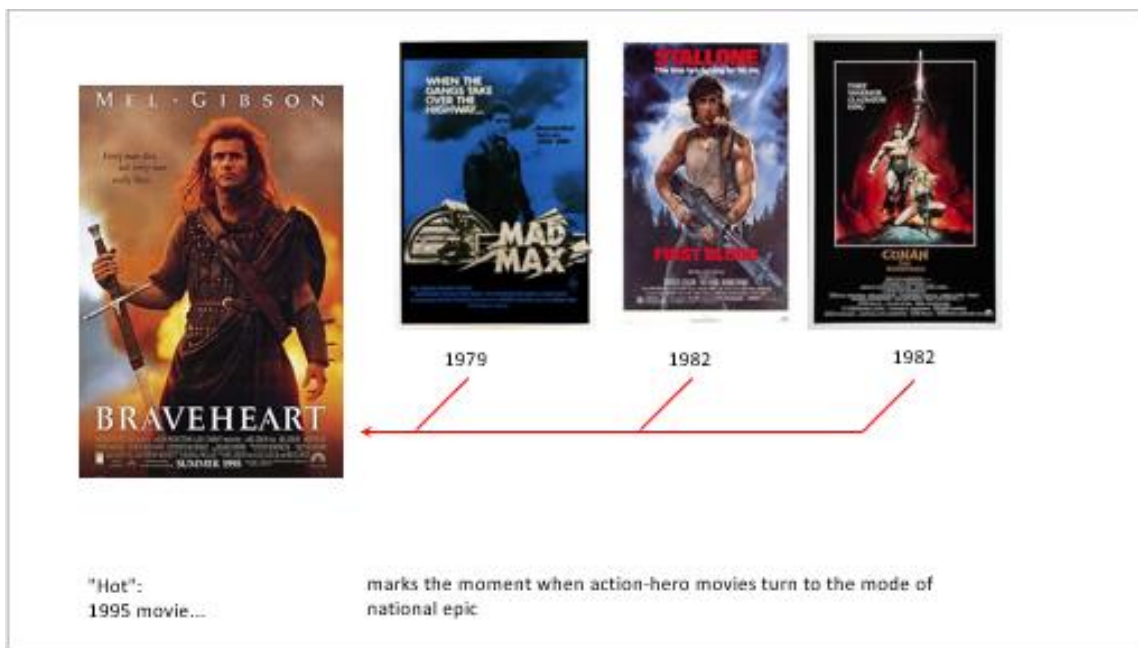
Baltic, in the Caucasus. In a further parallel, Eisenstein's film was only one step in the ongoing relay of the Nevski cult.

After the collapse of Communism in 1989, the building of Alexander Nevski-churches resumed; two new film versions have been made; they tell, once again, how he defended Russia's western borderlands against the attacks from the Wicked West. Trivial, banal, potboilers; Aragorn in Cyrillic letters. I am bracing myself for the musical version. But also: an important factor to understand contemporary Russian nationalism – and the informal ideological feeding-ground of Putin's war against Ukraine. In Michael Billig's terms, the cooling-down from "hot" to "banal" has gone "hot" again. Cooling down is not a one-way process; unlike entropy, it is reversible. Things that had become banal, unnoticeable, suddenly reveal their ongoing power to inspire attitudes and to influence political choices.

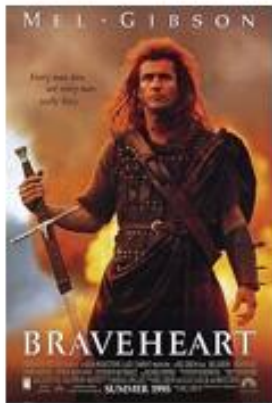
Banality is powerful. A good example to demonstrate I shall now discuss; it can be found in the British isles.

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One of the most noticeable recent examples of cultural nationalism was the movie *Braveheart* (1995). It was a global success. In the English media, such as *The Spectator* and *the Independent*, the film was criticized for its anti-English sentiment; but in Scottish cinemas, audiences were cheering; and the Scottish National Party experienced a noticeable boost post-*Braveheart*.



*Braveheart* marked a change. The Hollywood action-hero movie, in which Mel Gibson had played prominent roles alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, now turned to the mode of national epic. Crisis moments in national history were used to showcase the bulging muscles and the lashings of blood, guts and testosterone.



"Hot":  
1995 movie...



...reinvigorates 19th-century cult...  
(Wallace monument, Stirling, 1869)



...witness new statue in car park...  
(Tom Church, 1996)

*Braveheart* made use of an existing Scottish cult of the national hero William Wallace. That cult had peaked in late nineteenth century, when a huge neo-Gothic monument to the hero had been built near the city of Stirling. Since then, the cult had cooled down and gone "banal"; the Stirling monument had become just one Scotland's less prominent landmarks on the tourist trail. But it was made "hot" again, very noticeable indeed, thanks to the Gibson movie. Visitor numbers to Stirling rocketed and the monument was modernized by the addition of a stupendously ugly statue in the car park featuring Gibson.

That is how hot and banal can move back and forth. But the case ramifies further. *Braveheart* not only played into the rise of *Scottish* nationalism; it also provoked the growing tide of *English* nationalism. Were there English equivalents of *Braveheart*? People have drawn attention to a rich crop of movies about Churchill and Dunkirk from the 2010s. Churchill's message that "England's finest hour came when, in 1940, she stood alone", was appropriated by the Eurosceptic Tories to mean that if only Britain could stand alone again, she would once again reach her finest hour. But the secret weapon that helped foster a sense of English exceptionalism and unilateralism was much less strident, much less "hot"; it was in fact the very opposite and took the form of the utterly, utterly anodyne.



Anti-“hot”:  
the invisible secret weapon of  
feel-good “Englishness”



Mel Gibson met his doom when he ran into Maggie Smith. The Scottish *Braveheart* was countered by the English costume drama *Downton Abbey*. Innocent feelgood entertainment dressed up in period costumes. No battles here, but the traditional Englishness of 4-o’clock tea, Miss Marple, Jane Austen, Mary Poppins and Victorian novels. (Jenneke!)

As my colleague **Menno Spiering** has shown, this Englishness, with its tea-and-scones, upstairs-downstairs, cottage-and-countryside traditionalism; with its ironically camouflaged nostalgia; with its sentimentality lurking under the stiff upper lip – this Englishness had been an important strategy in the steady rise of British Euroscepticism since the 1960s. The author of *Downton Abbey*, Julian Fellowes. Lord Fellowes is an aficionado of the Victorian author of *one-nation Toryism*, Anthony Trollope. In one of the episode he has plagiarized a wartime propaganda film, *Mrs Miniver*, where Englishness is used to beat, not the Scots or the EU, but the Nazis.

So: both *Braveheart* and *Downton Abbey* owed their success to their mastery in re-activating older, dormant cultural and literary models. They tap into a quietly subsisting repertoire, that has receded deep into the background. How deep this background radiation of cooled-down nationalism can recede I noticed in 2018 when I visited a British garden centre. In that shopping mall for the comfortable middle classes, I spotted a display of DVDs on special offer. They promised comfort viewing for Sunday afternoons or Monday evenings.



Feelgood nationalism:  
The tenacious persistence  
of forgettable movies

**"comfort food" DVDs for sale in British garden centre, 2018:**  
*costume-drama adaptations of Victorian and "period" literature*

Prominently displayed were the many BBC costume dramas based on classic 19<sup>th</sup>-century novelists, with lashings of local-colour Englishness and period feel. In the next stand, targeting the male rather than the female customers,



Feelgood nationalism:  
The tenacious persistence  
of forgettable movies



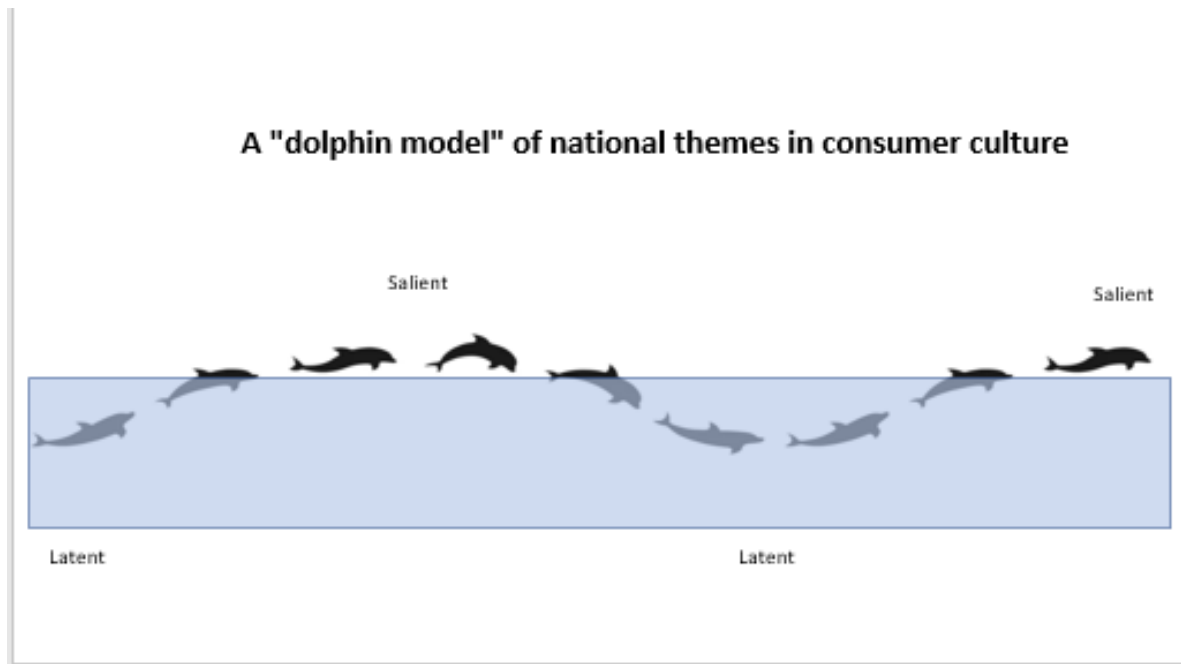
**"comfort food" DVDs for sale in British garden centre, 2018:**  
*evocations of World War II*

there was a great selection of war movies, Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* flanked by *Dad's Army*, generous helpings of Churchill and gung-ho military action stuff. All of this recalled Britain's finest hour when she proudly stood alone. Remaindered DVDs in a garden centre: it doesn't get much more banal, or trivial, than this.

But here, I felt, I came face to face with the deep cultural undercurrents that delivered Brexit when *nobody* was expecting it. It is to be found, not even in the new productions, but in the ongoing availability of half-forgotten older ones.

So: In order to understand and diagnose the persistence of Romantic Nationalism, we must analyse how its cultural repertoire has been kept constantly available and in circulation. We must study the bargain basement of culture. Behind the Scottish National Party we need to see *Braveheart*, and behind *Braveheart*, the Stirling monument; behind Putin, we need to see *Alexander Nevskij*, both the film and the many cathedrals. Behind Boris Johnson, there is *Downton Abbey*, and behind *Downton Abbey*, there is *Mrs Miniver* and Anthony Trollope and all the stuff in the garden centres.

Studying the ongoing cultural presence and persistence of romantic-national repertoires feels like studying the motion of a dolphin:



it startles us and attracts our attention when it rises above the water's surface, glistening in the sunlight, briefly. There she blows! Now you see it – and then you don't. But its trajectory is defined by how it swims under water between the moments of its salient visibility. Similarly, we need to understand nationalism, crucially, when it is submerged, becomes invisible.

These submerged states are called “banal” or “trivial” but they are neither. Something that can exercise such a powerful ideological influence without even being noticeable deserves a better terminology. I prefer using the notions of *Salient* and *Latent* cultural nationalism – more or less for what Billig calls “hot” and “banal”. And my special interest is in the hidden power of the latency state. It is a place where things are felt rather than noticed, as fleeting sensations briefly experienced.

This brings me to the final part of the lecture. Below the waterline, in its latent state, Romantic Nationalism camouflages itself as something that is so fleeting that it is not even political, as something *unpolitical*.

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“*Unpolitical nationalism*”? Surely that is a contradiction in terms – for what *is* nationalism if not political? But in fact, nationalism has a habit of denying its political nature.

## “Unpolitical” nationalism: Romantics

1808: J.G. Fichte, *Reden an die Deutsche Nation*: Loving your national community is like loving your parents or children a moral imperative rather than a civic duty

1832: Jacob Grimm, *De desiderio Patriae*: Love of the fatherland is a natural human affect everyone in exile feels homesick.



*Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said,  
This is my own, my native land!  
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd,  
As home his footsteps he hath turn'd,  
From wandering on a foreign strand!*

Sir Walter Scott, 1805

We encounter this unpolitical *romanticization* of nationalism right at the beginning as it emerged. In 1806, the Romantic philosopher Fichte argued that the love we feel for our country is as natural and as sweetly human as the love that parents and children feel for each other. Love of the nation is a political extension of family values, as it were. The romantic fairy-tale collector Grimm drew attention to the notion of homesickness. Much as homesickness is a universal affect for people in exile, so too love of one's country is a natural, universal human affect. There is nothing political about it. As the Romantic poet Walter Scott put it, only dead souls could be insensitive to the joy of coming home to one's own, native land. That sentiment, and the line “breathes there the man...” became a widely-quoted meme, virally echoing far and wide across the century.

This is a powerful argument, and I do not wish to dismiss it out of hand. But it has set the tone for a standard rhetoric where even hard-core political nationalists, separatists or xenophobic chauvinists pretend that engagement for the cause of the nation is unpolitical.

From the many examples. I only single out Thomas Mann's tract *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, published at the end of the First World War. Mann in 1918 was not yet the Nobel Prize winner of later years; this tract is a piece of nationalistic propaganda, defending the German war aims and war methods. Mann argues that “democracy” and “politics” are artificial concept invented by the frivolous French and the perfidious English; true Germans have no need for such politics and stand united as a single nation behind their *Kultur* and their soldiers.

Two centuries after Walter Scott and a century after Mann we have become accustomed to the idea that loyalty to the nation is *unpolitisch*. That nationality is a moral, anthropological thing rather than a social one. That surely there is nothing wrong in cheering your national football team. The Englishness of *Downton Abbey* is a matter of family values and decent domesticity, and offered as family entertainment. The politics are there – sometimes the Irish question is mentioned, or the economy, but only as incidental dissonants in the jolly feelgood story about a harmonious, organic community.

Even the aggressive heroism of national epics will romanticize their aggressively national message as unpolitical.



To begin with, the hero's defence of the nation is always presented as being, fundamentally, about *freedom*.

Who could possibly disapprove of freedom? Freedom, like family values, is a universal. But in these epics it just so happens that the tyrants are invariably foreign, and oppression is always something imported from abroad. Lack of freedom within the home country is never ever thematized. Much as the servants in *Downton Abbey* cheerfully embrace their subservience, so too the hero's home society's is always represented as an uncoerced, harmonious community, where freedom is always a given, never a cause. Slaves, servants, subaltern women? Perish the thought. "Freedom" here does not refer to the individual's liberty and their empowerment to pursue their happiness; it refers purely to the military expulsion of tyrannical invaders from abroad. What is called freedom is in fact armed self-defence and it refers to a territory rather than to a society. In an Orwellian misdirection, social freedom is redefined to mean: national sovereignty. And the warrior-hero who loudly proclaims "freedom!" is in fact an authoritarian military commander.

**Melodrama:**

- simple (also epic) storylines, simple emotions
- no mixed feelings or complicated characters
- black-and-white contrasts between happy moments and tragic moments
- black-and-white contrastst between Good Guys and Bad Guys

Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976)



1915



1938



1995

The other form of romantic camouflage is this. These movies are nothing if not *melodramatic*, by which I mean that they follow stark black-and-white contrasts. The storyline avoids complexity and mixed emotions; it yoyos between scenes of delightful bliss and anguished despair; the characters are sharply divided between heroes and villains, between Good Guys and Bad Guys. How Bad the Bad Guys are is invariably demonstrated by the fact that they rape, torture and kill women and children.

Indeed, these nationalistic action movies are without exception full of horrendous violence against defenceless victims, mostly women. Their suffering demonstrates the lustful, sadistic malice of the Bad Guys and that in turn explains and justifies the righteous anger of the heroes – and of the spectators.





D.W. Griffiths' classic *Birth of a Nation*, the prototype movie of American nationalism and white supremacy, features actors in blackface impersonating disenslaved African Americans; their main purpose is to pursue and rape screaming, terrorized white women. Those women are then saved or avenged by the movie's heroes, the Ku Klux Klan. In *Alexander Nevskij*, the Teutonic Order, (against whom our hero defends "the Russian land", *Russkaya zemlya*) throw innocent babies into the fire. And in *Braveheart*, what motivates Mel Gibson's battle fury is the rape and murder of his young wife by the English army. Those scenes of torture and sexual violence are lovingly and lingeringly represented: these films are as sadistic as the villains they denounce. The emotional manipulation is obvious: we share the heroes' disgust at the revolting depravity of the villains, and we understand why they are driven to violence. The melodrama takes us from screaming women to raging men.

And so the national conflict is played out in the very intimate arena of our primal emotions, our feelings about family, loved ones and children. Those feelings are unpolitical, but they are manipulated melodramatically to justify a message of national warfare and territorial sovereignty.

Movie plotlines are full of such melodramatic devices. They have been flourishing across the twentieth century in increasing intensity, as historical fiction moved to the mass entertainment of the modern action movie, and as romanticism became sentimentalism.



During the inter-war period, we find epic hero-worship in the Romantic tradition everywhere in the European cinemas. After 1945 and during the Cold War, this genre survived mainly in the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe –



in the USSR;





in Communist Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia;



in Hungary and in Romania.

This communist fosterage of national epic melodramas is remarkable. It may help to explain why nationalism made such a very strong comeback in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism.

But cinema is a global industry, stretching beyond Europe from Hollywood to Bollywood. When we move out from the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> we must also broaden our scope to take in the wider world. (see also <http://show.ernie.uva.nl/movies> ).



Nationalist melodrama has proved itself a very strong presence in the cinema of emerging nation-states everywhere. India has been a major player since late-colonial times and early independence. Latterly, Turkey has been successfully exporting its nationalistic TV serials throughout the Islamic world. In these countries, too, the action thematizes themes and tropes that had become popular and canonical in the preceding century, and the action makes grateful use of heroic and colourful historical settings.



In the case of Turkey, Osmanli tribal history and Ottoman Sultans (with thanks to Meltem Burak and Kadir Dede; <https://ernie.uva.nl/viewer.p/21/74/filter/0-OR:106-282312/grid/>);





India  
2009

marketed internationally on DVD under the title "The Queen of Jhansi".

Celebrating Lakshmbai, leading figures in the Indian Rebellion of 1857



1953 version, first Technicolor film made in India

thx, Bob vd Linden!

In the case of India, anti-British or anti-Moghul heroes (with thanks to Bob van der Linden; <https://ernie.uva.nl/viewer.p/21/74/filter/0-OR:106-287901/grid/>);

This is where we see Romantic Nationalism going global in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The themes may be older, but their celebration and their canonical form can be dated back to nineteenth-century, Romantically-inspired vultural nationalists. The themes may be national but the melodramatic treatment is universal.

There is also a remarkable convergence world-wide in how these national-heroic action movies are presented:

## Bad-ass hair, bad-ass attitude, battle-ready



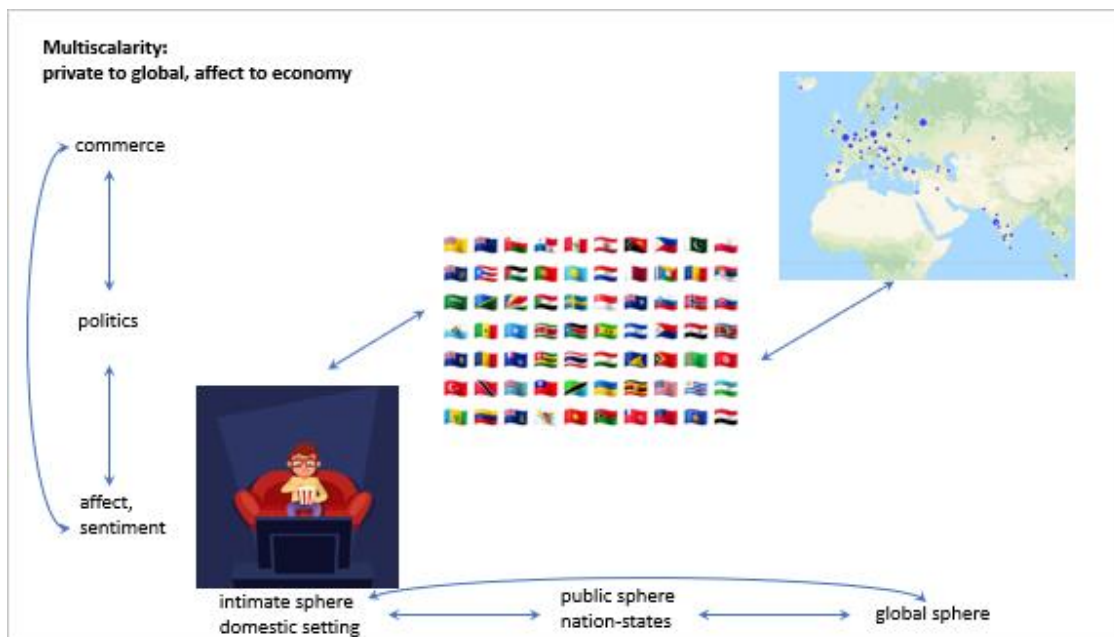
Foregroundedly there are always rough-hewn heroes with bad hair and a kick-ass attitude glaring at us defiantly, against a tempestuous background of stormy skies and battlefields. They look ready to storm the Capitol in Washington as it were,



## Bad-ass hair, bad-ass attitude, battle-ready



their aggression and toxic masculinity validated by the fact that they commit their violence in the service of the nation and what they call the nation's "freedom".



Movies like this are Unrestricted, in the Bourdieu sense. They can be easily and cheaply enjoyed by private customers on their domestic couches watching their home screens. While we snack our popcorn, we are outraged when a foreign tyrant commits rape or murder and we cheer when a foreign tyrant meets his gory end. All that takes place at the most intimate, emotional, private level. Nationalism here becomes a visceral affect, a private and unpolitical emotional state. Thus the scalarity of the genre connects the **intimate individual level**, where the action is savoured in domestic home entertainment, and the **global industry** in which these films are produced and distributed. Between the intimate and the global, between emotion and business models, the **nation**

is continuously reaffirmed as the natural middle ground. The nation is the natural locus of our loyalties, where human sentiments meet civic engagement.

This, Ladies and Gentlemen, is how Romantic Nationalism has survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and why it continues to be the most powerful political ideology in today's world.

To conclude.

In today's politics we witness a resurgence of virulent anticosmopolitanism. Public opinion-making is suffused by melodramatic schematizations, playing the invariable trump card of family and country, and where "freedom" is always monopolized for oneself, not for the rest of humanity. In order to understand and diagnose this new nationalism it is not enough to analyse the social circumstances in which it prospers; we must also understand how its repertoire and sentiments have been kept in circulation over time. Behind the nationalism that saliently manifests itself in political action there is its latent, inert, and unobtrusive presence in the world of consumer culture.

All this remains a necessary task for the future, and I should really have delivered this as an inaugural lecture rather than a valedictory one. Studying the cultural history of political ideas and national affects is something which, in taking my leave, I recommend to my colleagues at the Department of European Studies at this University. I wish them fortitude and success in maintaining a place for the historical humanities in the analysis of international relations.

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It is not in the nature of elderly men to be optimistic about this sort of thing. What I can more happily admit to is gratitude. I have plenty of reasons to be thankful.

What confidence I have is most of all vested in my students. As I am learning the brittle art of growing old, I notice, as Marcus Aurelius and Bob Dylan did, that students remain forever young. European Studies is attracting bright and committed students from many countries, in this cosmopolitan city they create a massively inspiring intellectual buzz. These students continue, undaunted and full of energetic curiosity, the core business of the university and of the humanities: "to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world". May those of you who have a calling for continuing research find a stimulating environment to pursue that calling, ideally in a Research Master's programme in European Studies. That, like Western civilization, sounds like a good idea. Dear students, to meet your eyes across the benches of the lecture halls (as I do now) has always been one of the great, ongoing joys of academic life. Keep your eyes bright, and your minds sharp, and your companionship cheerful. And may you stay forever young

Secondly I thank the university librarians and the faculty's secretarial and administrative staff. Dear friends, in choosing to be flexible rather than rigid, personable rather than officious, you have the secret, invisible power to turn the academic workforce into a human community. So often you have done just that, and it was you most of all who made me feel *at home* in this university. We often talk of "rooted cosmopolitanism", and that phrase always makes me think of you: because it is you guys who root this university, who provide a home ground for this transnational temple of learning: right here, in this proud and kind city of Amsterdam, and among straightforward and dauntless Hollanders.

When I started at European Studies in 1986, I was one of the young ones, looking up to elder statesmen like Wim Roobol and Max Weisglas, and our founding father Albert Rijksbaron, and my dear departed friend Arthur Mitzman. Now I am following them into retirement, and my colleagues all seem so young, and I feel a bit like an uncle to them, sometimes grumpy, but always affectionate.

The people whom I saw obtain tenure: Yolanda, Marleen, Krisztina, Marjet, Guido and Alex, and the precariat of young PhDs and guest researchers: Enno, Tim, Linde, Jesse, Ayşe, Bob, Thomas... And Ewa, Sudha, Robin and again Marjet who are taking over the editorship of our flagship book series... all of you! It is now up to you to maintain our mission: “to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world”. I am glad to leave it to you when I see what a committed and talented bunch you are, and above all, when I see heart-warming collegiality that you can draw on. May that collegiality help you through the challenging times which the humanities are facing, and the culture-historical humanities in particular. I thank all my past and present colleagues for all the collegiality they have shown me.

## Thank you to:

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- Colleagues within European Studies and in the wider academic field
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And here is a shout-out in particular to a few of those whose practical support helped me prepare this lecture. It is the tip of an iceberg. To thank all those to whom I am indebted would amount to an entire autobiography. In other words, my autobiography would consist largely of acknowledgements of gratitude – gratitude to the whole world and, under God, to so many people in it. To be able to say that is a mighty blessing.

And most importantly of all, sitting right in front of me, and smiling at me right now – there is Ann Rigney. This lecture has demonstrated from beginning to end the many many ways in which her work has been an inspiration to me, ever since our student days. I should acknowledge that huge intellectual debt as a matter of common academic decency.

[Personal words to Ann and our children]

Finally, I want to thank all of you for being here; and I want to do that in my native language and by returning to my own, my native land. In these closing seconds, please go back in time with me to a moment long before the rise of nationalism.



In 1130, near my hometown of Maastricht, a gathering of learned nuns took place in the convent of Munsterbilzen. The meeting was recorded on one of the blank leaves of the convent's Gospel book. The names of those studious women are listed, and after 900 years we can still read the roll-call: Gerberga, Lutgardis, Oda, Mechthildis, Engelberta, Elizabeth, Gertrudis... and underneath is written, in a mixture of Latin and medieval Limburgish:

*Tesi samanunga vvas edele unde sconā / et omnium virtutum pleniter plena.*

This gathering was noble and fair / and fully replete with every virtue.

Quite so.

Harteliken dank veur euren aondach. Ich höb gezag wat iech te zègke haw; 't Is good gewees; tot v'r us eine gaon drinke.